

Saigon Plans To Restrict Refugee Moves

By Peter Osnos

Washington Post Staff Writer

DANANG—The South Vietnamese government will not permit hundreds of thousands of refugees from Communist-held areas to return to their homes after the cease-fire takes effect and will punish them if they try, according to U.S. officials here.

South Vietnamese troops and police have been ordered to restrain the refugees, forcibly if necessary, American sources say, and even refugees from government-held areas will be allowed to go back to their villages only a few thousand at a time.

As an example of the government's position, an elderly man at a refugee camp just outside Danang said police had warned him that if any member of his large family disappears, the rest will be stricken from food-distribution rolls.

If peace comes, the old man said, he will return to his village in a Communist-occupied portion of Quangtri Province "at any cost." He is too old, he complained, to endure the sufferings of the crowded, barbed-wire-enclosed camp.

President Thieu is said to consider strict control of the South Vietnamese people to be the most important task of his government in the uncertain cease-fire period. To allow a gradual slipping away of refugees anxious to return to their native villages, Thieu evidently believes, would loosen his control over the rest of the population.

Predictably, U.S. intelligence sources say, the Vietcong regard getting people to move back to Communist-held districts as their top priority. So the conflicting pressures on

the refugees seem certain to continue.

In all, American figures show that there are now 641,000 people living in refugee camps throughout the country and an untold number, certainly in the millions, who left their homes at some point in the war and may soon wish to return. Many of these fled to Saigon and other major cities, others merely went from one village to another.

On paper, the South Vietnamese government controls about 90 per cent of the population and between half and two-thirds of the land, including most of the inhabited territory of the country. In fact, a sizable percentage of the people are in marginal or contested areas where Communist influence is as great as the government's.

American officials here and in Saigon say that for the foreseeable future every effort will be made to keep all refugees in place, ostensibly so that resettlement can be "orderly." A propaganda campaign to that effect has been mounted, and families that wait their turn will be rewarded with building materials and a small sum of money to help them rebuild.

It is acknowledged, however, that once people begin to understand the meaning of the cease-fire—that the day of United States and South Vietnamese bombers and heavy artillery from both sides is past—they will begin to move and it will be next to impossible to stop them. The draw of the ancestral homeland is far stronger, regardless of its political complexion, than government promises of tin and piastres.

The only people over whom Saigon has direct authority are the 641,000 living in camps. They left their villages in the midst of last spring and summer's heavy fighting and depend on the government for food and shelter. Few if any have substantial resources of their own.

Of the total number in the camps, about 75 per cent—some 400,000 people—are from Quangtri, Binh Dinh, Kontum and Binhlong, the provinces that are wholly or very largely in Communist hands. These are the people most directly affected by the government's restrictive orders.

The largest concentration of these refugees is in the Danang area, where 258,000 people are crammed into 34 sites fashioned from abandoned U.S. installations and barren sandflats. Virtually all are from Quangtri.

The South Vietnamese government "has made it clear all around," said one U.S. official, "that anyone from the Communist areas is going to have to relocate elsewhere."

The government has announced its first resettlement program for Quangtri, involving about 17,000 people who are scheduled to be returned in mid-February to their villages in the one district firmly in government hands. The over-all plan calls for moving 50,000 people in the next few months.

At that rate, and given the inevitable delays, it would take years for the refugee camps to be emptied, and it is unlikely that many of the people living there would be willing to wait. At Camp Brooks, one of the biggest camps, 11 families are jammed into each barracks with no privacy or sanitary facilities.

Schools and dispensaries are rudimentary, and the refugees say there is not enough food and what is available is of poor quality.

The old man who said he would go home at any cost was one of the few at the camp who would speak out, emboldened by his great age. Why should he stay there, he

demand. In his village, he said, he had seven acres, three water buffalos and 34 pigs.

Other refugees said they did not wish to return home until the Communists had left, but it was not clear whether this attitude stemmed from anti-communism or a continuing fear of the consequences of living where bombs and artillery so frequently fell in the past.

The government intends, U.S. sources say, to relocate some of the Quangtri refugees in another part of the country, probably further south. In the past, rumors of such large-scale resettlements have caused considerable controversy because few of those involved wanted to go.

Last year, a group of several thousand Quangtri residents were moved south to Phuoc Tuy and Long Khanh provinces shortly before the offensive began. The move was complicated by Communist attacks on the resettlement sites.

American advisers say that besides the security problems, the relocations have been hampered by the desire of many of the resettlers to go home after a few months, even if home is the sterile sandy dunes of the coastal Quangtri plain.

Refugees and officials agree that the government has been unusually efficient in curbing whatever organized activity there has been in the camps for a return to Communist-held areas. U.S. intelligence sources said that systematic sweeps of the enclosures have been made by troops and special police to arrest Communists agents and sympathizers identified by informers.

The word has been passed that anyone inciting the refugees will be locked up. "If they resist," Saigon newspapers quoted official sources as saying, "they will be shot."